Of Seamstresses and Shirts Sarah Thursfield

One thing most re-enactors have in common is the shirt on your back; but how much do you really know about it? Did you know that the shirt you wear during the week is the direct descendant, with an unbroken pedigree, of the Saxon version? Here's a brief account of the evolutionary process.

The origin of the linen shirt lies – like so much of civilised life – in the area south-east of the Mediterranean sea some four thousand years ago. The locals took to wearing a simple T-shaped linen garment which was an early example of something cut and sewn from cloth, rather than just wrapped from a complete piece. A single linen garment is enough for the Middle East, but as the type moved northwards it made sense to wear warm woollen garments on the outside, with the linen layer on the inside. Thus was a winning combination born, which in the form of the worsted suit and white shirt is still with us today.

The poor rate of survival for linen fibres in archaeological deposits makes it impossible to say how widespread the use of a linen shirt was in Roman and Dark Ages Britain; we have to wait for more detailed written and visual records to be at all certain.
'Shirt' is a Saxon word (and 'Skyrt' the related Norse one). By the early eighth century it is used in combination with 'tunece' so at least the wealthier Saxons were in the habit of wearing linen next to the skin, under a woollen outer garment.
The early shirt was a T-shaped, sleeved garment. To allow for movement this needs either an underarm gusset or a sleeve which widens under the arm: there's evidence for the use of gussets as early as the first century, but there are also later examples with tapered sleeves instead of gussets. The shirt was made from linen or hemp ('canvas' is also 'canabis'), usually but not exclusively in a plain weave. Like all fabrics at this time the weave was more solid than most modern examples, which are not woven for the same kind of durability!
The sewing of shirts was already careful and precise with seams made to enclose all the raw edges, so they wouldn't fray when laundered, and to lie flat against the body, so they wouldn't chafe under your outer clothes. According to Penelope Walton Rogers, the workmanship on linen and woollen items found at York is sufficiently different to suggest that they were in the hands of different workers: the shirt may already have been the particular concern of the seamstress, not the tailor.
By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there are visual images to show the basic form of the shirt and written accounts to tell us that linen undergarments were made by seamstresses, while male tailors made the outer clothing. By 1300 even peasants appear to have worn shirts, often blue ones: linen takes up woad better than it does most other dyes, and the dyeing might have been cheaper than the more

up-market bleaching. As the import of medium-priced linens increased during the fifteenth century, these blue shirts disappear.

The fifteenth century offers us much more detail than earlier periods on the acquisition of clothing. Hemp canvas and linen of every quality were imported from France, Flanders and Low Germany: at less than threepence a yard any working man could afford a couple of canvas shirts, while a gentleman now expected to put on a fresh shirt every day. The gentleman's shirts were fine Holland or even Rheims linen, bleached white and costing as much as two shillings and sixpence the yard. Workman and gentleman alike might expect his wife to sew his shirts, but professional seamstresses could be found in every town and may have supplied ready-made garments. Considering the popular assumptions about medieval clothing it's worth noting that after spinster the two commonest female trades at this time were seamstress and laundress. So no, it wasn't all made at home, and yes, they did wash their clothes!

Perhaps it's because simply owning a shirt was no longer a mark of status that the fashionable version began to get more elaborate in the later fifteenth century, and for the first time the outer clothing began to be cut away and slashed to show off the linen beneath. Do note, though, that the fold of fine linen you see round a man's neck in portaits of this time is not actually his shirt but an extra bit called a breast- or neck-kerchief, tucked inside the high doublet collar to protect it from the wearer's neck.

By the 1480's the cutaway doublet front may reveal a 'pinched' shirt, with the neck edge set in tiny gathers on an inner band. The best-known example of this is Durer's self-portrait of 1498 in a white doublet and stripy nightcap, his shirt pleated to a depth of about 10cms. At the same time the sleeves became wider and were pulled out in puffs at the back of the doublet sleeves.

The shirt played its part in the blossoming of dress-as-an-art-form in the sixteenth century. The low 'pinched' neckline evolved first into a little standing frill, then to a close-fitting neckband with the frill at the top and the full, fine body gathered on below. The sleeves acquired matching wristbands and frills, and the neck- and wristbands were fastened with fine silk ties. This is also the time when embroidery became an essential feature of the fashionable shirt, first on the neckband (take a close look at portraits of Henry VIII) and then on the frills. As the century progressed the embroidery spread onto the body of the shirt; the seams might be worked with insertion stitches; the collar and cuffs first expanded and then detached themselves as a 'suit of ruffs'; and then came lace.

The seamstresses of the seventeenth century produced the most technically stunning shirts of all time, some of which have survived in museums and galleries. Even the plainest may have each part hemmed, often with a decorative stitch, and then joined up with lace insertion or knotted stitching, and many of them feature fine blackwork embroidery or flat white satin stitch and needle-lace motifs. Where the collar and cuffs are made in one with the shirt the lace on

them may be 10cms deep. One example in the Whitworth Art Gallery (not currently displayed) has three different bands of cutwork, one of them nearly 3cms wide, and tiny gathers at the neck and sleeveheads held down by couched designs in fine cord. Each part has been hem-stitched all round before joining with narrow inserted bobbin lace, and tiny knots of braid reinforce the points of strain.
All this needlework is minuscule, most of it carried out in white linen thread so that it is scarcely visible to the casual glance. All is done on crisp, fine plainweave linen of a quality that no modern manufacturer can produce, and all the linen is cut and worked 'to a thread' of the weave, so the garment is perfectly square and the patterns are perfectly even. And this was just for underwear!

While the gentlemen were enjoying this finery (and I sincerely hope they did enjoy it) the working man's shirt had also become more elaborate. The plain T-shape probably went out of general use during the seventeenth century, though as working men's shirts do not get put away and treasured it's difficult to be certain. It was replaced by a gathered shape which had evolved from the fancy shirts of the sixteenth century. These had the same straight, folded body as the old shirt but the neck was now cut as a straight lateral slit and gathered into a close-fitting band or a turn-down collar. To take the strain a small triangular neck gusset was inserted at each end of the slit before gathering. The neckband was fastened by laces threaded through eyelets at the ends of the band, or sometimes by a cloth button. The sleeves might still be set on plain at the shoulders, but were gathered into a band at the wrists and fastened to match the neck.
Is it necessary to point out that all these garments pulled on over the wearer's head? Only tiny babies wore a shirt open down the front.

This was to remain the basic form of shirt until the mid-nineteenth century, though it developed a few new features over the years. I have been unable to find any plain shirt which is definitely earlier than the second half of the eighteenth century so I can' t be certain when the main changes came in, but they probably go with the adoption of plainer shirts by gentlemen and with the narrowing of the coat-sleeves towards the middle eighteenth century. The typical eighteenth-century shirt had the sleeves gathered closely at the shoulder with a larger underarm gusset for ease. To finish off this gathering on the inside the seamstress put in a long narrow 'sleeve piece' or 'lining' to face the armhole, and on the outside she put a narrow strap from sleeve to collar to reinforce the shoulders against wear. The front opening often had a whipped frill of lace or very fine muslin, which was pulled out at the top of the waistcoat. No other trace of ornament remained, no insertion, no embroidery; just the precision of perfect hemming, oversewing and backstitching.
We've now reached the era of written instructions for 'workwomen' which show that you ordered your shirts by the dozen or half-dozen. A specified quantity of yard-wide (90cms) linen was measured off, the

largest part for the bodies and the rest divided with absolutely no waste to make sleeves, collars, wristbands, linings, straps and gussets – right down to little triangular reinforcing gussets for the ends of the wrist openings and 'the hearts for the bosoms' – thumbnail-sized heart-shaped patches stitched at the base of the neck slit. This pattern of shirt continued well into the nineteenth century and many can be found in museums (though usually put away in boxes, rather than on display). The workmanship is consistently precise and fine, the body and sleeves set in minute gathers into the collar and wristbands and these bands usually trimmed with a row of backstitching. No wonder some have been worn and patched almost to disintegration.

During the first half of the nineteenth century we start to find cotton shirts, though they were regarded as 'suitable for working men' as was blue check or striped linen; gentlemen still wore white linen. Frills went out of use, and instead the shirt might have an inserted front panel with tucks or a little white embroidery. Fastening was always by buttons, first with the thread-wound 'Dorset wheel' type and then with mother-of-pearl. The first departures can also be seen from the cut based entirely on rectangles and squares: one occasionally finds a shirt with curved armholes, or with the shoulder straps replaced by a narrow yoke.

The big change came in the 1860's as the sewing machine came into widespread use. As is often the case with technical innovation the primary object was not to improve quality, but to speed up production and thereby reduce costs: the sewing machine could not hem, or oversew, or set in gathers like a seamstress, so the basic form of shirt had to be revised to suit what it *could* do. The thousand-year-old concept of dividing a piece of fabric without waste was replaced by a simple shaped pattern, now usually cut out of the ubiquitous Manchester cotton rather than linen (which proved harder to mechanise). The High Victorian shirt had a shaped yoke and collar, plain sleeves, and a body with curved side seams and rounded tails, topstitched throughout at lightning speed.

It was still pulled on over the head and closed by a short buttoned stand at the front. By the 1870's the idea of a shirt open for its whole length was nudging its way in, but it was remarkably slow to catch on. 'A man's most dangerous moment…is when he's getting into his shirt, when he puts his head in a bag. That's why I prefer those American shirts that you put on like a jacket' observed a fictional character in the 1920s; but my father, who was born in 1921, says that the first open shirts he owned were bought for his wedding in 1950.

The modern shirt is usually polyester cotton and always opens down the front, but it would be recognisable to a nineteenth-century wearer. What would shock him, and what represents the biggest change in the shirt's history, is that it is no longer underwear. Throughout its history, whether pinched, guarded, lace-edged or embroidered, the shirt was almost entirely hidden under the outer clothing. Any tendency to show more than the collar and cuffs, other than for hot

and strenuous work, was met with outraged protests from the grumpy old men who have always appointed themselves arbiters of decency. In the course of the twentieth century the waistcoat – which gave us the term ' in his shirt*sleeves*' – has disappeared from daily use and even a light jacket has become an 'outer garment' rather than essential clothing. Only your shirt comes between you and the world.

And now we have the re-enactor's shirt, and one thing has long puzzled me: where, in the above history, did the drawstrings come from? The gathers onto a yoke, and the panel of criss-cross lacing at the front, are attributable to Hollywood versions of history: they look good on Errol Flynn even if they don't belong in the Civil War. But drawstrings? I've come to the conclusion that they are probably the legacy of the Indian cheesecloth blouses, *circa* 1970, which formed the basis of many a re-enactor's first outfit back in the heady days of cut-off cords for breeches and hessian for everything else; and they persist because they are easy for slop-sellers to mass produce. But now you know its pedigree, isn't it time you paid a bit more attention to your shirt?

Of Seamstresses and Shirts   CAPTIONS

Image 1: Thresher in blue shirt, hose, baggy braies and coif. He will have left off his longer tunic for energetic work. Late 13th century, English: re-drawn from Bod.Ms. Corpus Christi 285.

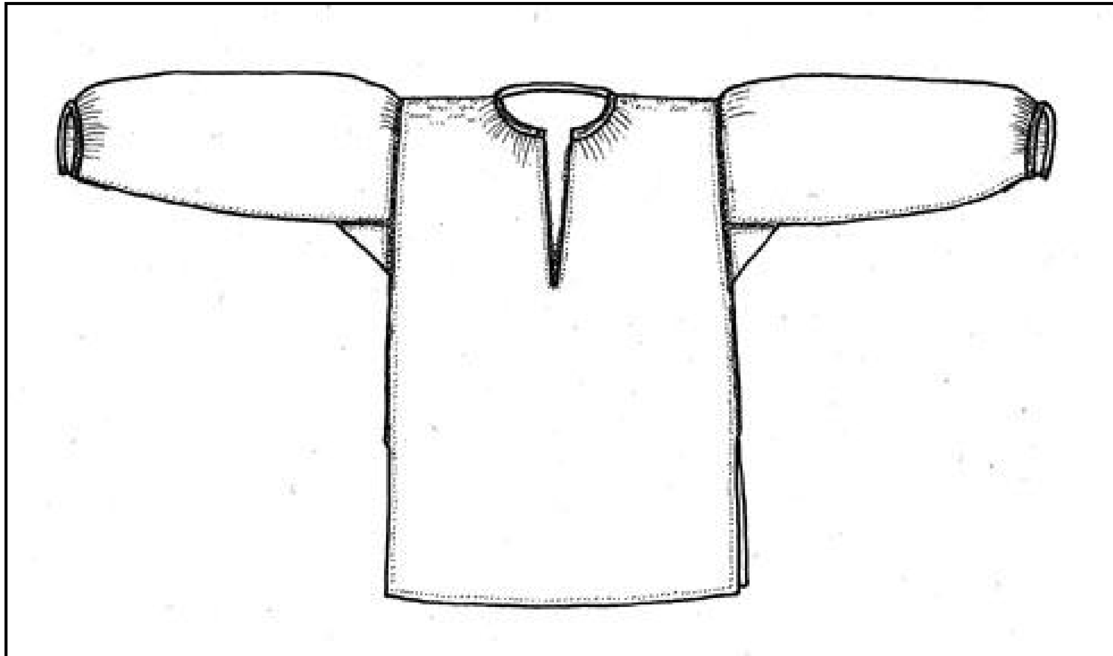

Image 2: A linen shirt of around 1600. Each panel is hemstitched, the panels joined with a lace insertion stitch. Narrow neck- and wristbands have slots at the ends for ties. White embroidery on shoulders, and narrow looped edging round the neck and wrist openings. Victoria and Albert museum T-49.1934.

Image 3: Neck details of four sixteenth-century style shirts by the author.

Image 4: Late 16th/early 17th century style shirt by the author with double-running stitch embroidery and bobbin lace insertion.

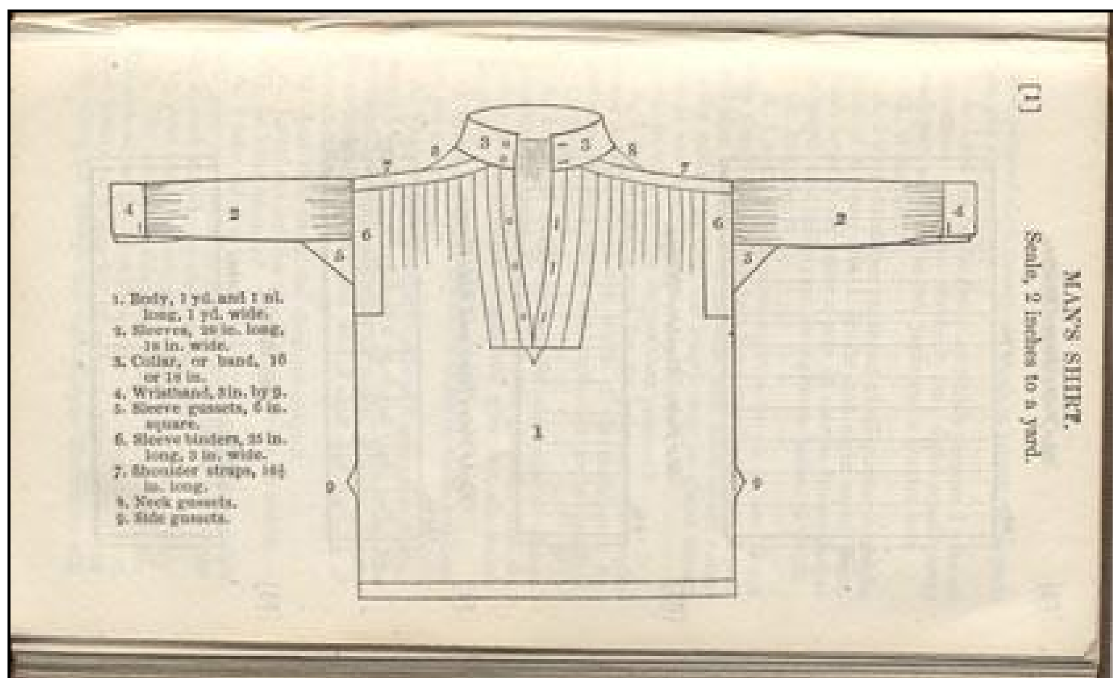

Image 5: A man's shirt, from the *Finchley Manuals of Industry no.4, Plain Needle-work,* 1856, showing the square construction still in use.

Image 6: A man's shirt, from *Needlework for the Upper Standards in Public Elementary Schools*, E. A. Curtis 1879 showing the machine-age shaped construction.

Further reading:

C. Willett and Phyllis Cunnington *A History of Underclothes*. Michael Joseph 1951 and reprints
Penelope Walton Rogers *Textiles, Cordage and Raw Fibre from 16-22 Coppergate* York Archaeological Trust
Agnes Walker *Needlework and Cutting Out* Blackie 1898 and reprints
'A Lady' *The Workwoman's Guide* 1841, facs reprint Bloomfield 1975
Dorothy Burnham *Cut My Cote* Royal Ontario Museum 1973
D H Lawrence *Lady Chatterley's Lover* Penguin 1960

Apply to the author for plain-sewing lessons.